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ABSTRACT

This paper examines three projects conducted by researchers from Brazil's Federal University of Sao Carlos and teachers from low-income, public elementary schools. The study investigated an inservice teacher education effort designed to strengthen family-school relationships. The projects were designed to generate knowledge about teachers' professional development processes and collaboratively construct strategies to bring together schools and families. Researchers examined whether adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving university-school partnerships and based on strengthening family-school relationships would enhance teacher professional education. They analyzed aspects of the learning-to-teach processes, adopted formative strategies, and teacher participation in seeking solutions to problems they identified regarding the local school context. After examining aspects of the teacher knowledge base and its relationship to a better understanding of students and learning, and analyzing ideas about family-school relationships within the Brazilian context, the paper describes study methods and results, highlighting essential elements for promoting teachers' professional development. Overall, parents expressed great interest in the educational process but did not consider themselves participants in the school community (though they wished for more active roles). Teachers felt parents were not interested in participating. They often had biased and incorrect opinions about families. Family-school contact often occurred through students. (Contains 50 references.) (SM)

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School-Family Relationship and School Success: some lessons from a teacher education program[1]

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Introduction

This paper examines the results of a set of three projects carried out by researchers from a Brazilian public institution (Federal University of São Carlos) and teachers from public elementary schools situated in lower-income communities in a medium-sized city in the State of São Paulo-Brazil. A research and intervention methodology was used in an in-service continued teacher education program aiming at the strengthening school-family relationship.

The goals of the projects were twofold: to generate knowledge about teachers' professional development processes and to collaboratively construct strategies to bring together schools and their students' families in order to foster learning. The basic research question guiding this study is: *does the adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving university-school partnerships and based on the strengthening of school-family relationship favor the professional education of teachers? If so, how does it take place?*

The objectives of the different projects involved:

a) To understand how schools and families see the relationship established between them and how this can be improved.
b) To delineate how families, including those with underachieving children, conceive schools and the work carried out them.
c) To analyze the professional development of teachers in situations of school-family relation improvement.
d) To analyze the university-school partnerships.

The adopted research and intervention model demands learning about the reality teachers work and involve define what they think, understand what they do and why they do it. With this kind of information is possible to researchers and teachers to reflect collaboratively, and, if necessary, construct strategies to deal with the lived situations considering the school and community characteristics.

This model presumes among other assumptions (Mizukami et al, 2002) that learning to teach and to become a teacher are processes – based on several experiences and knowledge modes – that begin before formal teacher education, continue throughout this period and permeate all lived professional practices. This learning involves, among others, affective, cognitive, ethical and performance factors (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Learning to teach is understood to be developmental and demands time and resources for teachers to modify their practices, the changes the teachers have to make go beyond learning new techniques and imply conceptual revisions of their educational and instructional process and of the theoretical teaching framework itself. Teaching is a dynamic and responsive act – on the teachers' part – to what happens in the classroom, in the interactions with the students, and is related to and takes place in an institutional context (Shoenfeld, 1997). Also implicit is our belief that teachers have a knowledge base that comprises a set of understandings, knowledge of different natures, abilities and dispositions needed for effective action in specific teaching and learning situations that support their decision making processes (Shulman, 1986, 1987; Schoenfeld, 1997). Teachers' knowledge, beliefs, objectives and hypotheses are fundamental elements in determining what they do and why they do it when they teach. Their classroom practices are

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influenced by the conceptions about the subject matter they teach, curricular contents, students and learning.

We view collaboration as a key characteristic of this constructive-collaborative research adopted model and conceived as a dialog assuming that teachers and researchers engage in conversations, exchanges and reciprocal professional development. Collaboration allows mutual understanding and consensus, democratic decision-making and common action (Clark et al., 1996, 1998). It implies a tendency for inquiry, whose objective is to generate new knowledge and to address daily teacher concerns and school problems. It is *also implicit in this model that each partner in the inquiry process contributes particular and important expertise, and that the relationship between classroom teacher and the university researcher, for example, is multifaceted and* ***not*** *powerfully hierarchical* (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p.478). Finally, the interpretation of the data and the context to which they refer is conceived as a collaborative act (Wasser & Bresler, 1996), in which multiple points of view are taken into account.

In the present paper we aim specifically to analyze aspects of the observed learning-to-teach processes, of the adopted formative strategies, of the teacher participation in the search of solutions for the problems they identified considering the local school context and culture. We are also concerned with the examination of the constructed strategies that could strengthen the school-family interactions and the promotion of successful learning. Initiatives that could improve the initial teacher education and the university-school relations are also discussed.

In first place we consider some aspects about teacher knowledge base and its relations with a better understanding of students and their learning. Secondly, we analyze some ideas about school-families relations considering the Brazilian contexts. Next we exposed the adopted methodological orientation and the main results obtained from these studies. The final section focuses on what we believe are essential elements for promoting teachers' professional development and for collaboratively constructing strategies to bring together schools and their students' families in order to foster learning through university-school partnership.

Theoretical framework

A growing body of literature on teacher learning and professional development emphasizes the kind of knowledge teachers should have and about the way beliefs constructed throughout their lives influence their pedagogical practices. It is argued that the central goal of teacher professional development programs should be the construction and the expansion of their knowledge base.

Among the many types of knowledge teachers should have, the specific content domain concerning their teaching area has been emphasized. According to Shulman (1987) the mastering of the specific content constitutes a basic source for the pedagogical content knowledge, which enables the teacher to represent the ideas to be taught in a way that they will be accessible to his/her students. In order to apply this knowledge it is fundamental that teachers know their students – how they think and reason, how they learn best, what motivate them - since their learning depends on their previous experiences and the context in which they live. In this perspective, student-directed teaching demands that teachers understand the differences deriving from culture, language, family, community, gender, previous schooling among other factors that shape personal experiences. This knowledge helps teachers to construct the pedagogical learner knowledge that will help them look for the best teaching strategies to address the different students learning ways and the selected goals for learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

Zeichner (1992) sustains that it is necessary that teachers: present the ability to learn about their students' particularities and communities considering their contexts; hold high

expectations; be able to establish bridges between the school's knowledge and the students' knowledge so as to bring to the classroom the cultural elements relevant to all different groups of students. The specific content domain, socio-cultural knowledge and the establishment of teaching strategies that promote the pupils' active participation are other abilities seen as important. In short, this author emphasizes that teachers should consider diversity as *a resource* rather than *a problem*.

Although we agree with this point of view, in general, conceptions about diversity, i.e., ideas presented by teachers about students that have distinct life experiences and belong to different socio-economic and cultural classes, focus on the individual. When these differences affect their work in an undesired way, many teachers concentrate on characteristics such as personality, motivation, family origin etc. Frequently it seems that they ignore contextual factors directly related to the classroom characteristics and dynamics presenting stereotyped/homogeneous students and their families' images. For part of the teachers, these ideas are not very flexible, i.e., differences are seen as determining factors in student failure or misbehavior and are often conceived as unable to be changed by the teaching process as it composes a immutable and impermeable set of characteristics. However, is not unusual that the teachers' expectations may be confirmed by the students' performance – as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

With respect to the students' families, Perrenoud (2000) indicates as important that teachers have the competencies of informing and involving parents in their children's schooling as being essential to teaching. He sustains that only recently have schools begin to see parents as partners, and the fact that schooling has become mandatory has deprived them of educating their children in their own way because today is there a social mandatory claim about an irrefutable argument to send children to schools: no instruction, no diploma, no salvation! However, it can be observed distinct educational demands and a growing distance between school and home education. As consequence, some parents perceives themselves as disqualified in terms of competence and available time to take care of and educate their children, and had easily transferred this task to better-qualified or more available professionals. In part, the relations between parents and teachers work according to this model, i.e., they seek some cohesion between the global agreement between the school programs and the parents' educative values and intentions. Nevertheless, not always is the dialog between parents and teachers balanced, since parents do not have the choice to reject schooling.

According to Hargreaves, Earl, Moore & Manning (2002) teacher-families partnerships sometimes represents a kind of threaten and promises to teachers: as they better understand the school practices they are in a more comfortable position to analyze and criticize the teaching and learning quality. A greater comprehension about the educational system politics, programs and curriculum implies a greater teacher responsibility. School-families interactions had became a "cliché in educational reforms" (p. 49). The family involvement in school questions and their empowerment is another question. Implies create opportunities to the families influence the academic curriculum and their children production. Stronger partnership, otherwise, aren't based only in a one-way communication system: teachers must learn with their students' parents as parents with them.

Our experience also indicates that it is not uncommon that school administration and teachers establish a connection between failure and the students' and their families' characteristics. In addition, we may say that teachers act based on their perceptions and interpretations of what happens in their classes and in the school, which in turn depends on the contexts where they work (Schoenfeld, 1997). These ideas – or personal theories – about the classroom realities define in a marked way how they develop the teaching process and how they interact with their students and their families. According to Tann (1993), many of these ideas are common sense based on the knowledge and understanding constructed by teachers in their life experiences, which influence their actions as indicated previously.

As researchers that experience formative/developmental professional processes at schools, we consider that the previous ideas are valid to our educational contexts. In view of the data about school failure in Brazil, it is essential that teachers develop a professional repertoire addressing diverse realities. It is also important that they learn to teach students that have varied cultural backgrounds between themselves and their teachers, as well as students that sometime failed in learning in their academic history. Our country has a diverse population in social, cultural, ethnic, religious and economic terms. Families have their conceptions about their role in school education and frequently think the school is right and know what has to be done. Nevertheless they do not have many opportunities to manifest their aspirations and desires. When this occurs it is usually in an indirect way. It seems to us it is necessary to understand how these different visions were originated so that we can establish a link between these educational agencies.

Themes related to families and schools have been widely investigated in Brazil from different standpoints and in many theoretical and methodological perspectives. The strengthening of the relations between these two educational instances – schools and families – is justified by the search for a converging way to deal with issues that affect the development of children and teenagers, pertaining to both socializing environments. This may help diminish the 'conflict zone' experienced by them and in promoting school success.

We believe that it is necessary to invest in bringing schools and families together considering and respecting their distinct characteristics, attributions and responsibilities, despite the fact that recent literature do not assert conclusively there is influence of families' practices on the schooling process of Brazilian children and teenagers. It is important to point out that we think that parent participation in the school should not take the place of the government's role in terms of accountability and financial support as pointed by Carvalho (1998) and in terms of its political responsibilities according to Rossi(2001).

There is a set of theories about what a family is, but the parameters adopted to describe it and its relation to work, consumption, social mobility and the State rarely contemplate the heterogeneity and singularities observed in the Brazilian society, as is the case of lower- and middle - income class families (Bilac, 1995). Due to demographic composition aspects such as the cultural and ethnical variety found in different regions of the country as well to its History, which allows many interpretations with respect to Brazilian families' organization and characteristics we can say that heterogeneous and singular attributes of distinct social classes characterize the Brazilian family as of a plural nature. It seems to be impossible to delineate conceptually a representation of Brazil's universal family due to the fact that it is not identical to all observers and that it does not display the same characteristics. Moreover, in view of the rapid changes in society lately, the concept of family cannot be taken as static and uniform anymore (Biasoli-Alves, 1994). Family characteristics have been changing in Brazil (Sarti, 1997; Neder, 1998), especially in the lower income classes, due to an intricate set of factors (Dias-da-Silva, 1991) involving factors as women' work outside home. There is a tendency to speak of "families", or more precisely "Brazilian families", due to the diversity of empirical models (Sarti, 1999).

Traditionally the family has often been considered as the child's first socializing agency. It has been its responsibility to promote favorable conditions for a "good" development (Ariés, 1981; Gomes, 1994). However, this idea cannot be generalized for all periods of history and all societies, or for all social classes. However, in Brazil the family is still supposed to provide the child with a stable and loving environment (Szymanski, 1997).

Regardless of this conceptual difficulty to define the nature of the Brazilian family it is necessary to value its function as the locus of production of basic social individual and collective identities, for all children, taking into consideration the promotion of their active

citizenship. This valorization depends on tolerance toward human diversity, especially on the part of social agents in the fields of public education, health, social assistance and security (Neder, 1998). According to Sarti (1999), this recognition is fundamental to prevent educational actions from being standardized as per a single and rigid family model.

Although some studies (Reali & Tancredi, 2001; 2000; 1998; Reali, Tancredi & Mattos, 2001; Tancredi & Reali, 2001; 2001a; Thisted, 2000; Almeida, 1999; Viana, 1999; Pauleto et al., 1998; Tancredi, 1998; Romanelli, 1995; Viana, 1995; Zago, 1995) present the families' viewpoints – whether belonging to the lower income or not – about the nature of the interactions established with schools, about their involvement, their investment in keeping their children at school, and about the function of the school and its practices etc, very little is known about what happens within the families as regards their children's schooling process. We suppose that it may be considered as an intricate collection of ideas, expectations, interactions and routines from the families toward the school and the processes developed in it. Apparently there are patterns deriving from personal and family experiences on the part of people involved in these interactions. We believe they constitute information net that is still unknown to school professionals, especially teachers; and this information has not been not explored in basic or continued teacher education programs.

The strengthening of school-family relations and the increased participation of parents so as to get families engaged in their children's schooling and in the educational decision making processes, has been pointed as an important component in numerous educational policies around the world that reflects a general societal trend. In Brazil, there are a set of official documents[3] that point to the need of the school enforcing qualitative connections with their students' families and communities.

Despite these initiatives we observe that Brazilian families are usually requested to get involved in school activities such as fund-raising, controlling their children's behavior and learning performance and helping with their children's homework. Hardly ever are they invited to take part in the elaboration of school's pedagogical projects since they are frequently considered as having insufficient knowledge to constructively contribute to school actions. It seems that the school professionals - teachers and principals - considers the ideal relationships with the students families as one in witch they "support teachers practices and schools in general, carry out requests, but do not interfere with plans and decisions"(Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995,p.464). However, parent participation in the school should not result in negating the teacher and school roles; attributing only to the families the responsibility of providing their children with the conditions needed for social, emotional and academic development (Carvalho, 1998, 2000).

By questioning why the school's interaction with their students' families is so fragile, so tenuous and subjected to the difficulties often observed in the schools and reported by parents and teachers, we raised the hypothesis that these actors, however engaged in shared socio-cultural tasks, may see themselves as being on opposite sides of the educational process. In spite of the fact that they share common objectives their relationships may often be characterized as ambiguous and by the absolute supremacy of the school orientations over their relationship to the students' families. It is possible that by the fact they do not know each other in a proper manner they reaffirm a situation that has prevailed for decades: The school think they know what students' families must be and do. To enforce the school tries to call the families to control their children according to the school rules. But families have their own ideas about what must be taught and learned in school but do not have an adequate and efficient communication channel. Additionally the families seem not to perceive their straight due to the absence of opportunities to congregate and share their ideas and recognize the power to influence the school.

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[3] *Referenciais Curriculares para Educação Infantil (1998); Proposta de Diretrizes para a Formação Inicial de Professores da Educação Básica (2000); "A escola de cara nova"* (Secretaria Estadual de Educação do Estado de São Paulo, 1996).

We believe that the schools must be responsible for the first steps toward the school-family relationship improvement taking into account its educational characteristics and nature. Any interaction in the perspective of joining schools and their students' families and communities should not inhibit the families' individual and collective voice. The school-family *partnerships* should not be just a stratagem employed by teachers and school administrators to maintain professional control by co-opting parental support (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997).

Despite the evident complexity of the theme we defend in our initiatives that all actions related to school-family interactions should be established based on each school's broader policies, social values and its explicit recognition that valuing the parents' role is part of school education but can not be a substitute for it. It is also important to take into account the characteristics that confer diverse task dimensions to the school, teachers and students' families.

We endorse, in the adopted perspective, that it is important to address the strengthening of school-family interactions with the purpose of improving student performance in teacher education programs.

The research and methodological framework

In general university-school interaction and teacher development programs have long favored technical rationality as the basis to its actions to understand and delineate both initial and continued formative proposals. In this sense the university and the university-researcher are conceived as the generator of the knowledge that must be transmitted to the schoolteachers and eventually applied in their classrooms. The schoolteachers are the "subjects" or the "learners" that must assume a passive role with a predominance of university-researcher/ university-teachers over them (Zeichner & Noffke, 2001). In this view teachers maintain a second hand relationship with the knowledge to be taught. This kind of relationship can be characterized as an exteriority connection were the content to be taught are not totally integrated to their knowledge base for teaching: it is a product defined by the cultural tradition and the social group that produces social knowledge. Teachers are considered as technicians and executants that have the task to transmit knowledge (Tardiff, Lessard & Lahaye, 1991). With respect to school-families interactions we can affirm that these themes aren't even discussed in their formative courses.

Recent research on teacher professional learning and development has indicated that this model does not consider to the teaching work specificities, the school's organization and functioning and the school actions. In fact teachers construct a knowledge base for teaching and to be a teacher in a developmental and practical basis. Similarly schools can be understood as "learning organizations", were their members can accumulate individual and collective experiences developing more effective and efficient ways to accomplish the established purposes (Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 1998).

We observe that the relationship maintained by the schools as their students' families have the same characteristics of that maintained by university researchers/teachers with future teachers and school teachers or saying in an another way: by the university with the schools. To alter this formative model and introduce in its format the beliefs and thinking analysis of future teachers, for example, it seems necessary to change the kind of relationship maintained by the university with the school and its professionals.

For this reason, we have adopted an investigative and formative model based on practical rationality, known as a constructive-collaborative model, to promote and analyze the interactions established between the university and the school communities. In this model, the existing relations between the schoolteacher and the university-researcher presuppose that all

parties hold knowledge that should be respected. We value the importance of the mutuality in purpose, the interpretation and reporting, and about the potency of multiple perspectives of each partner (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

Based on these ideas, we believe that in-service teacher education programs should be adapted to specific schools and that the structure and content of these professional development programs should be determined by the schoolteachers themselves and should preferably occur at their workplace. This is important once it is necessary to attend to the local characteristics, the multifaceted community of each school in a manner that teachers can better known their students and their families.

In this sense the adopted model implies the understanding of the contribution of the diverse members of the group, their individual and collective ways of thinking and acting, their strengths and limits, their underlying models of causality and causal inference (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

The analysis below draws on data from three studies which have focused on the work with in-service teacher education, considering the school-family relation and was carried out in public K-8 schools in a medium-size city in the State of São Paulo, Brazil, in lower-class incomes districts.

A general research question guided all projects and it was related to understand if *the adoption of a constructive-collaborative model involving university-school partnerships and based on the strengthening of school-family relations can favor the professional education of teachers*.

As a rule the project began with the school's request, followed by meetings between the researchers and teachers to establish a common work agenda.

The work always began by eliciting the teachers' conceptions about their students, students' families, school-family interactions and ways to improve these relations. This preliminary phase guided the subsequent ones. The families were interviewed, at school or at their homes, about the school's functions, the importance they attributed to the school, modes of contact with the school and teachers, expectations as regards school-family interactions etc. The information provided by the families was shared by the teachers. In all situations, events that aimed at bringing the school and families together were collaboratively organized by the researchers and teachers. Data collection modes were: interviews, questionnaires, and observations at meetings and at the events.

More specifically the researchers were at the same time active participants and observers of the several steps of the development of the projects.

During the research development we usually had fortnightly meetings with the schoolteachers lasting about one hour and a half each. In the three projects the intervention research lasted approximately one year and a half each.

We also considered that the meetings and shared activities with the teachers constituted formative situations as new knowledge was socially constructed through discussions about what each community defined as a problem to be investigated.

Most of the teachers with whom we worked may be considered as experienced professionals, since they had been teaching for more than 5 years. In general, they had higher teacher education majors. Because they worked at public schools they were all subject to precarious work situations: high teaching workload; large classes; little institutional time to

prepare classes and study; low salaries; and the need of complementing their monthly income with other activities, not always related to teaching.

The first project involved two teachers of acceleration classes and their students' families (50), children with grade-age discrepancy and school unsuccessful stories, for they had a past of frequent change of schools – due to belonging to migrant families – and sequential retentions (some had attended the same grade more than three times). It implied the gathering of their families' conceptions about the school's function, school failure and keeping the children at school. It also involved the establishment of ludic activities for the teachers, students and their families in order to bring these actors together.

The second project involved the 27 teachers of a K-6 school that also had specific programs for 7-14 year-olds during the day and for 10-14 year-olds on the evenings (6:00 to 10:00 p.m.), in a total of 650 students. The project involved the mapping of all the 27 teachers' and the families' conceptions about the school-family interaction, the function of the school considering the service it provided, the alternatives to improve these relations and how the parties perceived each other. In this last case 63 families were interviewed. A folder was organized by the teachers about the theme "Discipline or How to Establish Behavioral Limits" in a several meetings organized and conducted by the researchers. It is important to note that the students' families suggested the folder theme. The folder content was discussed with the students' parents and relatives in an event aimed at bringing the school and community together.

The third project was carried out at a 5-8-grade elementary school that also offered programs for adults in the evening. In this case, after asking the families (through the examination of 550 questionnaires corresponding to 30% of the students) the school decided to work with the theme "The importance of what is learned at school" in an event set up for this end. The 46 teachers, grouped according to the curricular contents they taught, defined what the parents should know about the theme.

The different projects can be centered on the analysis of the professional development of teachers with the use of a collaborative and constructive model of research and intervention as well as the university-school partnerships.

Some results

Families' point of view about the school and the school-families interaction

The parents expressed great interest in the school and its educational processes, even when they belonged to the lower income classes or educational levels and their children had a past history of school failure.

They reported that they only came to the school when they were explicitly requested to do so, since they did not see themselves as participating members of the school community. Many times they were contacted by teachers at the school gate or corridor to hear about their children problems without any kind of privacy.

Generally, the teacher's complaints issues on these occasions referred to their children's behavior, seen as inadequate, or their insufficient academic performance and the school expectative was that the school expectation was that families could solve or improves those conditions.

They indicated that they looked for ways to help with their children's homework and other academic activities. For instance, they used creative ways to promote reading or

mathematics, many of them not considered at to the school, such as the use of advertisement fo9lders as instructional material as pointed by the second study families.

In the third study, for example, the parents, even when offered the possibility of discussing themes about their children's life as violence, drugs, TV, sexuality etc., instead chose to talk about what was taught at the school concerning different subject contents.

The parents and relatives indicated that the school and the teachers often adopted a communication language they did not fully understand, as for example, reports to the illiterate families, which demanded the help of other people and of the student him/herself to be interpreted.

The parents demonstrated, in distinct situations considered the three studies, interest and disposition in better understanding the pedagogical work carried out by the school and in taking active part in several school activities – considering the specificity of their social role.

Teachers' point of view about the students' families and the school-families interactions

Most of the teachers participating in this research, in the three school communities, considered that the students' parents were not interested in their children's schooling process and that they stayed apart from the education carried out by the school or even confronted it. The teachers underestimated the parents' investment in educational issues and particularly their ability to understand what was taught at school.

In some cases the teachers' opinions about the families were biased and based on beliefs established possibly at the time when most of them began teaching at the school. This certainly influenced the school-family interactions despite the fact that the neighborhood and the school community have same changing characteristics.

Our data suggest that other teachers show stereotyped opinions about the families, what seems to be related to the former characteristics of the communities where the students live, i.e., neighborhoods with poor, lower per capita income, low schooling and migrant and unemployed people.

Many teachers were prone to attribute to most of their students' families some negative characteristics present in just a very small group of them.

We observed, however, that at the schools there were shared beliefs at the schools that had been established from individual beliefs and from those more directly related to the school history and the economic and cultural contexts of the community. Our data are restricted to schools in lower-income neighborhoods, which do not allow any generalization to be made. Nonetheless, our experience with other educational situations shows that many teachers relate their negative views as related to their student's academic failure. This opinion may be extended to other Brazilian contexts.

Considering the data obtained in this work we can affirm that the teachers' conceptions about the students and their families do not necessarily correspond to their real characteristics. This may be attributed to the fact that the school-family interactions were tenuous and not always favoring reciprocal understanding.

The School-families interaction observed: some notes

Our observational data confirmed what the teachers and parents reported: the contact between the school and the families often occurred through the students, who acted as go-betweens; the meetings with families and teachers lasted just a few minutes and took place at the beginning or end of classes, especially when the students were underage; at the classroom doors or hallways, when the parents are requested to come to the school; and in bi-monthly meetings to consider the students' performance and other school announcements. Seldom did the parents feel encouraged to come to the school on their own. It was, on the whole, a unilateral interaction, since it was the school's prerogative to get in touch with the families, to define the topic of the conversation, and establish its duration and adopted language.

Based on this background we consider that it is important that the school invest in the knowledge about students' families, since what the teachers think about them influences the relations that they establish with the students in their classroom practices. In addition, we believe it is necessary to know how beliefs about students and their families are established and maintained throughout time so as to be able to eventually propose ways to change them through continued teacher education programs at the schools and focused on their needs.

Most teachers do not always recognize clearly the importance of establishing interactions with their students' families in order to be able to learn who they are, what they expect from the school and how they can actively participate in their children's schooling process. The teachers' daily burdens may interfere with the construction of conceptions about this interaction and practices that favor family involvement in the school. It is important to point out that this theme isn't often discussed and thought in the preservice programs considering our context.

Our point of view about teacher professional development process

As the projects developed we began to consider the meetings and events as unique moments to collectively (researchers, schoolteachers and families) elicit conceptions, to analyze and eventually change the participants' ideas.

Apparently, these changes and the time they demanded were not the same for all participants. The reason for these differences is not clear. We noticed that the meetings and events were enriching moments as regard establishing dialog, sharing knowledge, getting in contact with new and unexplored ideas, getting to know one's peers and their conceptions. We suppose that these differences are due to their personal disposition toward change and personal characteristics. For instance, we observed a greater involvement of those teachers that had already experienced situations, not necessarily school-related, in which collaboration was a key factor in achieving the desired results.

Nevertheless, we also observed in these processes some resistance on the part of some teachers in getting engaged in the construction of the interventions with the families. Their behavior led the university-researchers to believe that they expected us to formulate the proposals despite knowing beforehand how the work would be carried out despite having joined the program. Intriguingly, this situation seems to be paradoxical due to their criticism against educational public policies that in their opinion do not usually empower them and do not actually provide the means for their effective adhesion. It seemed that the commitment assumed collectively by the school and the other teachers was not their own.

We believe that because adhesion processes may suffer distinct influences - from the school administration, from peers, from lacking of acceptance by the group, from not wanting to be explicitly different etc. –, which interfere with the development of the work it may occur in different levels of commitment. It is also important to point out that possibly some teachers were expecting different model of university-school relationship based on technical rationality

and where "our" role was to prescribe their actions in place of a collective construction. They expected, probably, the same kind of relationship they were used to have.

Some difficulties related to the school organization as regards the meetings between the teachers and researchers were observed. In general, some of the pedagogical work timetable included in the teacher's weekly schedule had this objective. However, urgent demands by the school administration and pedagogical coordination often used up the time set apart to discuss issues not related to the project development. This aspect made it difficult to follow the programmed schedule. A further obstacle was that some teachers had other professional duties, such as teaching at other schools, which restrained their full participation in the project in spite of the fact that they were being paid for it, as evidenced in the case of the K-6 school.

In the three situations analyzed, we observed a broad parental adhesion to the initiatives carried out by the school considering their large presence and participation in the proposed activities. We noticed, in these circumstances, a lot of enthusiasm by the teachers to carry on, improve or expand these initiatives. However, aspects related to the discontinuity of some local educational policies, the implementation of new school objectives as well as the annual relocation of teachers around the local schools implied starting academic activities almost from scratch. These school organizational characteristics limit long-terms experiences as the one we are discussing.

From the beginning we supposed that the continuity of the approximation program could be favored by the longer presence of the university-researchers at the school. Nevertheless, some non-controlled variables intervened in changing this possibility in spite of our disposition.

The teachers' enthusiasm didn't survive the school urgencies and their need of not been involved in longer duration projects, which demand a high personal involvement and that have few possibilities in attending the expectations of all the teachers participants.

Finally, we couldn't conduct follow-up studies for evaluating the permanent effects of the different experiences in the school – as an organization – and in the teachers individually. Thus, little can be said about the real changes occurred in the school-families interaction culture.

Final considerations

Several points emerge from the data presented here.

We assumed that the schoolteacher knowledge about the students and their families, when elicited and confronted with that of their colleagues, would foster the search for strategies aimed at strengthening the school-family interactions. The ideal interaction should consist of a type of bilateral communication, appropriately initiated by the school. Not only should it address school problems but also the way of life of children and teenagers, considering who they are, what they like etc (Bhering & Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). In order to reach this interaction level the school should help its teachers to get to know better their students' families as well as provide the families with space and information in order to be able to approach the school more confidently. We consider that this is an issue that the initial formative programs must develop including the teacher professional relationship with varied members of the school community.

The absence of an adequate school space and information may give the families the impression that their opinions and knowledge are undesirable and without value by the school professionals, which keeps them away or make them feel uncomfortable at their own children's school (Jasis, 2000). Through a process of *silent agreement* part of the families even against

their own will (Miceli, 2000), can endorse the teachers' perception/belief that they are uninterested and incompetent as regards their children's school education.

Considering the diversity of contexts and its characteristics it may not be reasonable to establish fixed rules for school-family communication, nor to propose a sole interaction model or even define a single parental role pattern concerning school matters. School-family relations, given their complexity, should be dealt with tacking in consideration their specific contexts and peculiarities. Schools are not all alike – despite being ruled by the same laws and regulations and having common objectives – and family environments are quit distinctive, in spite of their apparent resemblance. These differences, which make every family and school idiosyncratic units, should be respected; thus school-family interactions should be recognized as distinctive. When their singularities are taken into account, it is possible to rise above their peculiarities to reach a common goal, which are, in principle, that of improving the quality of students' learning.

In the work activities we have carried out with the constructive-collaborative model of research and intervention we used observation, interviews and questionnaires to gather information from the school community (teachers, administration personnel and families), regular meetings with the teachers at the school, and the organization, the development and the assessment of these events aimed at gathering the school and its students' families together.

We believe that the interviews and meetings with the teachers were important moments of inquiry, reflection, and collaboration as well as moments to characterize the teachers' thinking modes and why they think the way they do. These moments are, therefore, formative and investigative spaces for the promotion of professional development, which demand from the participants personal and voluntary involvement in the proposed activities.

Although we had assumed that learning to teach might occur through this collaboration process we noticed that at first some teachers hesitated to participate, because they did not know the researchers and had not established mutual trust. As time went on the participants became more comfortable toward change and its processes, improving collaborating with their peers. Based on these exchanges we expect that in general all participants – teachers and researchers – experienced changes, be they in practices, theories or expectations, in relation to themselves and/or others. We also suppose that these changes were not common to all, whether in quality or intensity, considering the school contexts and its teachers.

The organization and accomplishment of the events, in turn, gave way to the establishment of alternative routes for parental participation at school, demonstrating commitment to their children's education and providing the teachers with the evidence that their conceptions about the families were not always valid. It was also an opportunity for the teachers to construct new knowledge about their students' families and for the parents to express their interests, worries and expectations.

Despite the events having promoted the construction of reciprocal knowledge, it is not the responsibility of an individual or a group to impose any actions on others, even when these actions may favor a more positive interaction or a better school performance. Before being accepted by all the participants, individual conceptions, including those of the students' families, should be collectively analyzed. In this process, the specificities of every participant's role and knowledge should be respected, taking into account everyone's culture. Moreover, the construction of these events demands time in order to be able to give the school and community a new lasting direction. The strategies used to bring the school and families together should not be merely reduced to the promotion of these events. School-family interactions should not be regarded as a marginal objective to the school or as an appendage to its daily work.

Unfortunately we observe that public policies seldom take these factors into account. They prescribe what should be done without considering the contexts, the actors, the proposals already existing at the schools, their histories, their teachers' previous conceptions, mental and time availabilities. They are just dumped uniformly and vertically on the heads of the different members of the school community. For example, Brazilian government has recently instituted the "Dia da Família na Escola" (day of families at the school). The script was the same for all schools and offered little opening for them to construct their own projects.

It is possible that some teachers' reluctance to effective participation in the proposed activities is related to some teacher education and performance policies predominating in Brazil that does not consider, in general, the importance of their participation both in devising and delineating these policies. This may be attributed to their expectation to solve problems in the short run without any effective involvement in the search of solutions.

It should be noted that Brazilian public policies ought to invest urgently in the improvement of the teachers' general working conditions, of the functional and organizational characteristics of the school to reduce the obstacles observed for teachers to share their experiences and construct a communal knowledge base. Moreover these conditions would enhance the potentiality that university-schools partnerships may better developed.

Given the contexts where the intervention-research projects were carried out (at the school and in direct, extensive contact with the teachers), the nature of the interactions established between the school and the researchers and considering the results obtained we may conclude that the chosen methodology was sufficient to bring forth the desired knowledge about the teachers' beliefs and conceptions, the quality of the interactions the schools established with the students' families and what the families think and expect from the schools.

In continued teacher education processes involving shared construction of knowledge and proposals of action that take into account the stakeholders' needs, as in the case of the strengthening of the school-family relations – we notice the importance of the *time* factor: the school has a timetable to which this kind of research cannot respond. The school chronology differs from the intervention-research one. This may generate, as a result, disenchantment on the part of some school community members concerning the work pace, since they expect to solve the problems as quickly as possible and in a manner that they believe have only to apply the prescribed actions.

Besides, conceptual changes do not take place easily and in a unique pattern. It also demands the establishment of a reciprocal base of trust between the different partners – schoolteachers and university-researchers. On the other hand, the present context not always allows us to do elaborate planning beforehand.

These are aspects that researchers should consider and, whenever possible, try to explain to their school partners as having a strong influence on the participants' willingness and involvement and on the possibility of carrying out longer lasting projects. This concur to avoid some aspects of the learning paradox indicated by Argyris and Schön (1996), when actions taken by the school participants to promote productive organizational learning actually inhibit deeper learning such as the presentation of defensive individual and group behavior patterns against the interned reforms.

The adoption of a constructive-collaborative model as an intervention strategy does more than just expose the teachers to the knowledge produced at the university. It helps them to actively participate in the construction processes of this knowledge and to implement viable alternatives to overcome the problems they face, e.g., strategies to strengthen school-family relations. Thus, this model may not be characterized as the usual intervention tools, but as an

investigative one. It emphasizes the epistemological importance of the knowledge of varied nature constructed by the participants.

Another advantage of this model refers to the possibility of better understand teachers learning processes in their workplace, which affects positively the basic teacher education programs focused by the researchers. It is then possible to apprehend the subtleties of the teacher professional learning process and the aspects related to the different teaching and learning contexts that would not be otherwise evidenced. Also to explore the process of making teacher knowledge more explicit, disseminated, criticized, codified and developed. By investing in continued teacher education models based on the epistemology of practice it is possible to obtain indications for the development of basic formation programs that consider and favor practical classroom situations and school contexts in their multiple dimensions.

We indicate below some factors that should not be neglected when one adopts the point of view of this research and investigation methodology in order to achieve the desired goals:

(a) The school should be considered as a privileged locus for the education of teachers and the construction of new knowledge about individual and collective processes for professional development.
(b) The application context should include the teachers' objective working conditions as well the school's organizational conditions.
(c) The partnership work (university-school) should originate from a real school necessity despite the fact that the first contact comes from the university.
(d) The knowledge and experiences of each group of participants should be tacking into account considering their specificity and should be shared by all.
(e) The researchers have to be willing to consider the school's culture, adopting a flexible frame of mind and re-construct their projects whenever necessary.
(f) The larger the number of participants from the partner school involved, there are the more chances of success.
(g) The school has to allocate enough time for teachers to be engaged in the work, especially for the meetings between the teachers and the researchers.
(h) The pedagogical coordination and administration committee should take part on the process and lead it.
(i) It is necessary to accommodate school community's expectations to the research and intervention actions.
(j) The trust established between all parties is important and takes time to be accomplished.

Among the relevant aspects concerning the adoption of this model we mention the opportunity offered to researchers to re-construct their knowledge in a continuous and shared way and the opportunity to experience varied professional learning contexts.

Finally, we consider that the school cannot be conceived anymore as mere a social agency detached from its community and other socializing agencies, such as the students' families. In order to respond to the demands that challenge the school nowadays and be successful it is necessary that the work with different partners (including the researchers and the university), be contemplated - what does not mean to neglect or minimize its function or the specificity of its educative role.

Nevertheless, some questions remain unanswered what demands new explorations: How to guarantee accurate schoolteachers' knowledge about their students' families considering that this is always a partial and not final understanding, their poor beginning teacher education, their inadequate working conditions and the singularity of school cultures? How to educate teachers to deal with diversity? How to break the resistance and bias constructed throughout different trajectories: are they belong to a given community or to a particular teacher? How to deal with the teacher personal right to show reluctance? How to involve the teachers that believe in a

formative paradigm distinct from the proposed one? How to deal with situations of collective responsibility in which the participants assume different degrees of responsibility and involvement? How to sensitize those in charge of conceiving and implementing the public policies that can meet the formative and professional needs of teachers and schools?

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